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THE LOCH NESS MONSTER: PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND THE EVIDENCE

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ABSTRACT: Nessie's public image is akin to that of mermaids or unicorns: almost everyone has heard of it, but few believe it is a real animal. This public image is at variance with informed opinion: books and magazine articles have, since the 1950's, predominantly expressed belief in the real existence of Loch Ness animals. This discrepancy, it is suggested, arises in part from the fact that the public image reflects newspaper attitudes, which have not changed since the 1930's.

"The Loch Ness Monster" qualifies as a cliche: "a commonplace phrase, a stereotyped expression" (*Oxford Universal Dictionary*, 3rd ed.). What are the connotations of this cliche? How did that come about? How accurately do those connotations reflect the knowledge gained by those who have studied the Loch Ness phenomenon?

Few people have not heard of the Loch Ness Monster. It is featured in cartoons, in prose and poetry for adults and children (Hoyle 1971, Hughes 1966, Kellogg 1977, MacKenzie 1952), in the catalog of a respectable supplier of scientific wares (Carolina Biological Supply Co.), in television commercials, at Disneyworld (Orlando, Florida), and in Busch Gardens (Williamsburg, Virginia). It is the very prototype of aquatic monsters: a Japanese trawler fished up *not* a South Pacific sea-monster, but a "South Pacific Nessie" (Anonymous 1977).

Even so, few people believe that the Loch Ness Monster actually exists as a species of animal; in fact, only 13% of adult Americans believe in it (Greenwell 1980). To most people, the Loch Ness Monster means a mythical creature, a Scottish tourist-trap, an occasion for jokes and hoaxes, a subject to be talked of in the same breath as ancient astronauts, Atlantis, and the Bermuda Triangle (Cazeau and Scott 1979, Sladek 1973). How well does that public image reflect informed opinion of the evidence that Loch Ness harbors an unidentified species of large animal?

Not at all well, if one judges by the books and articles dealing with the subject. I have located some two dozen books and about 250 articles in magazines (in English). All but one of the books projects some degree of belief in the reality of Nessies (Bauer 1980). Overall, about 45% of the articles project belief, and only 35% express disbelief. But there has been a pronounced change in attitude over the years (Table 1): up to the 1950's, disbelief was preponderant, whereas since then the articles expressing belief have been twice as numerous as the skeptical ones.

TABLE 1.—Distribution of expressed belief in magazine articles.

	Strong or complete belief	Tendency to belief	Neutral	Tendency to disbelief	Strong or utter disbelief	Numbers of items
1933–34	25%	5%	20%	10%	40%	27
1935–50	25%	0%	10%	0%	65%	12
1951–59	40%	10%	15%	5%	30%	22
1960–71	50%	10%	10%	5%	25%	69
1972–80	40%	10%	20%	15%	15%	113
1933–80	40%	5%	20%	10%	25%	243

That the informed writers on a given subject regard evidence as convincing, of course, is not in itself a good reason for believing that evidence. There are innumerable cults whose bulletins and journals express beliefs that are rejected by most of us—about astrology, for example, or a flat earth, or the healings and predictions by Edgar Cayce, or a whole congerie of such mystics, cum psychics, cum charlatans, as Rudolf Steiner or Madame Blavatsky or P. D. Ouspensky or Annie Besant and so on and on.

The writings about Loch Ness do not fit this stereotype, however. With only a handful of exceptions, the books come from very respectable publishers, and the magazine articles have appeared preponderantly in respectable journals (Table 2): about 100 in such general-interest magazines as *Time, Harper's, Illustrated London News, Listener,* and *Reader's Digest*; about 50 in magazines of popular science—*Popular Mechanics, Popular Science, National Geographic,* and so forth; about 30 in the scientific literature—*Science, Nature, Herpetological Review,* etc.; and between 30 and 40 in special-interest periodicals, *some* of which represent the gullible fringe—*Fate,* etc. Altogether, less than 5% of the literature about Loch Ness could be dismissed as coming from clearly untrustworthy sources.

It is also noteworthy that the number of articles in science journals and popular science magazines has increased markedly since about 1960. The

TABLE 2.—Numbers of articles in periodicals of different sorts.

	General-interest magazines	Popular science for laymen	Regular scientific journals	Special-interest (non-scientific) periodicals
1933–34	15	4	5	3
1935–50	8	1	—	—
1951–59	16	2	—	—
1960–71	32	22	5	3
1972–80	29	18	19	29
		(None during 1936–56)	(None during 1935–67)	(None during 1935–66)

TABLE 3.—Type of periodical and projected attitude.

	Strong to slight belief	Neutral	Strong to slight disbelief	Numbers of articles
General-interest magazines	45%	25%	30%	98
Popular science	40%	20%	40%	47
Special-interest (non-scientific)	50%	30%	20%	34
Scientific journals	25%	45%	30%	29

most qualified expert opinion has become willing to consider and to write about Nessies during the last two decades. Belief in Nessies is projected more in the nonscientific periodicals than in the scientific ones, but even in the latter there is as much belief expressed as disbelief (Table 3). In 1980, a survey of American and Canadian aquatic biologists revealed that nearly 40% of those scientists gave credence to the evidence that Nessies are real animals (Greenwell and King 1980).

It is also worth noting that pro-Nessie writings are more factually accurate than are the critical ones (Table 4): one third of the debunking articles contain serious errors of fact, and another 10% have minor errors; of the neutral and pro-Nessie writings, only 5% to 10% have serious errors, and only another 5% to 10% have minor errors.

Altogether, then, the considerable amount of serious writing on the subject over the last 20 years has taken a stance somewhere between openminded and favorable to the existence of Nessies. Yet the public image remains as I described it earlier—skeptical, even sarcastic, preponderantly against giving credence to Nessies as real animals. I now want to show how this dichotomy of attitudes (the public cliche at variance with the soundest knowledge) came about. Not that such a dichotomy is at all unusual. Cliches and stereotypes sometimes have little or no relation to the actual facts. An outstanding recent example is the cliche, "the ugly American," used in a sense that is dia-

TABLE 4.—Correlation between expressed disbelief and errors of fact.

Expressed attitude	Percentage of articles containing no signif-icant errors	Percentage of articles with			Numbers of articles
		Minor errors	Definite errors	Totally erroneous presentation	
Strong or utter belief	84%	10%	3%	3%	97
Inclined to belief	84%	11%	—	5%	19
Neutral	84%	5%	2%	9%	43
Inclined to disbelief	65%	8%	19%	8%	26
Strong or utter disbelief	57%	10%	17%	16%	58

TABLE 5.

Month	Items in *London Times*
1933, November and earlier	—
December	29
1934, January	17
February	0
March	1
April	1
May	1
June	1
July	1
August	6
September	3
October	1
November	2
December	2

metrically opposite to the one in which it was originally introduced (Lederer and Burdick 1958).

My thesis is that public opinion has been molded far more by the newspapers than by books or magazines, and that attitudes projected by the newspapers have not changed over the 50 years during which the Loch Ness Monster has been a cliche. It was, in fact, quite reasonable and consonant with the evidence to regard the matter as a hoax and a contrived tourist attraction in 1934.

On the first point, the combined circulations of the important newspapers ensured a more widespread public impact than that made by the monthly

TABLE 6.—Frequencies of writings, 1933–79 (numbers of items in each category).

	Items in *London Times*	Articles in journals; chapters or sections of books	Books solely or chiefly about Loch Ness
1933–34	65	27	1
1935–39	21	4	0
1940–44	1	3	0
1945–49	0	4	0
1950–54	3	5	0
1955–59	1	20	1
1960–64	11	40	3
1965–69	11	20	3
1970–74	12	27	7
1975–79	27	89	11
Totals	152	239	26

periodicals, let alone the full-length books that came decades later. Likewise, on the analogous subject of UFO's, a survey has found that newspapers exceeded magazines as a source of information by a factor of between 2 and 3 (Strentz 1970).

The *London Times* treated the Loch Ness story as prime news at the end of 1933 and into the New Year: 46 items appeared between December 8 and January 18 (Table 5). But on that day, an editorial stated: "The creature . . . is clearly of a retiring disposition, with an abnormal, a truly monstrous, dislike of publicity . . . 'tis gone—gone rather stale by now, perhaps, and ere very long to be gone west." Since then, the *Times* has not changed its opinion, giving very little coverage to Loch Ness—five mentions from 1940 to 1959, and only a couple a year since then (Table 6), except when there was considerable publicity over underwater photographs in December of 1975. So the *Times* has not responded to the change which occurred among informed people. In part, no doubt, this has been due to the fact that the number of informed people is small and not well or readily known to journalists. Also, newspapers are not good at treating subjects in depth and perspective, points illustrated in detail in the previously mentioned study of press coverage of UFO's (Strentz 1970); one might state that newspapers deal in (and propagate and perpetuate) cliches, rather than examining the origins and justifications of cliches. The inflexibility of editorial attitudes, especially on this type of subject, was vividly illustrated by a Scottish newspaper whose editor wrote, in 1970, that the paper had not mentioned water monsters since the time it had been taken in by a hoax—in 1877 (Campbell and Solomon 1972: 102)! This lack of perspective in coverage is also illustrated in the *London Times*: There is a possible reference to the Loch Ness Monster in a 7th-century biography of St. Columba, and that reference was mentioned in the *Times* on six separate occasions, each time as though it were a novelty to be drawn to the readers' attention (13 December 1933, 2 May 1934, 11 August 1934, 7 July 1960, 12 May 1972, 12 December 1975).

It was indeed reasonable to conclude, in early 1934, that the Loch Ness Monster business was spurious. Expert opinion ascribed the reports of sightings to such stray visitors as a whale, a shark, a large seal, or to such phenomena as mirages and tree-trunks. A couple of reports of the monster venturing onto land, crossing the loch-side road, added high improbability to the whole affair. One of those reports was coupled with the hoaxed discovery of bones on the shore; another hoax fooled an expedition sponsored by the *Daily Mail*: a supposed spoor of the monster had been made using a preserved hippopotamus' foot; and Commander Rupert T. Gould, who made a personal investigation, concluded that a sea-serpent had become trapped in Loch Ness—at a time when science did not recognize the existence of sea-serpents (Dinsdale 1982, Gould 1976, Mackal 1976, Witchell 1976).

So there was ample reason for the public image of the Loch Ness Monster to be what it became in 1934. That public image has not changed, but the evidence *has*. I suspect that a similar situation is likely to prevail in all cryptozoological quests until, in each instance, absolutely incontrovertible evidence is in, and that seems to be defined by biological scientists as actual specimens.

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